

Which Way to the The Social Policy Implications of

There are many challenges to the health and well-being of Canadian children and families. Increasing insecurities of all kinds are eroding the foundations of their well-being. This isn't news; we've all experienced dramatic changes in our lives, or at least witnessed them in the lives of others. But is anyone doing anything to address these fundamental challenges? Or can we only shrug our shoulders and mutter, "*c'est la vie*"?

by David I. Hay

The quest for solutions is beginning to help us make sense of our situation and discover common ground, both in understanding the challenges themselves and in developing proposals for meeting them. But what is this 'common ground'? And can it help us temper the continuing conflict over commitments and policy directions for children, youth, and families?

To answer those questions, we must first understand the international and domestic commitments we have already made to Canadian children, youth and families. We must analyze current trends in government spending and investments, and recognize the policy choices these trends represent and the policy context and underlying values guiding them. And we must articulate the goals and principles that contribute to child and family well-being, so that we can assess policy options and answer more clearly the question: Which way to the good life?

Canada's international commitments

Following World War II, politicians recognized the need for a mix of political, civil, social and economic rights as the foundation for humanity and a new world order.¹ These rights were expressed in documents like the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1966 Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which Canada ratified in 1976, giving the weight of international law to statements such as: "... parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living. . . including adequate food, clothing, and housing." In 1991, Canada also ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates that "every child has the right to an adequate standard of living," and outlines the responsibility of government to "take appropriate measures to assist parents to ensure these rights are met."

Unfortunately, our international commitments have not been sufficient to ensure social and economic security for all Canadians. Many analysts believe that Canadians' social rights have been eroded as a result of political agendas, economic imperatives, and governments' lack of accountability to the international commitments they have made. These commitments do, however, obligate Canada to a periodic review and public reporting of its social policy mandate which many nongovernmental organizations have used for education and advocacy. Using the United Nations as a high-profile international forum, they have created a negative media image for Canada, thereby applying pressure to improve social and economic security.

On a more positive note, periodic reviews by UN bodies require governments to examine their social policy mandates and provide public documentation of their legislative commitments.

Good Life?

Child and Family Well-Being



Domestic social policy commitments

In 1994, the federal, provincial, and territorial Ministers of Health endorsed the population health approach in *Strategies for Population Health: Investing in the Health of Canadians*, which summarizes and discusses the determinants of health, defined as the multiple factors that contribute to the health of populations. This approach serves as a framework for the development of policies and strategies to improve the health of the whole population, and is reflected in both *Nutrition for Health: An Agenda for Action* (1996) and *Building a National Strategy for Healthy Child Development* (1997). These two documents explicitly ground their policy directions in the population health framework and emphasize the need to ensure adequate health opportunities for vulnerable or at-risk populations, especially children.

When the emerging National Children's Agenda comes to fruition, it, too, is intended to address the develop-

A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK FOR WELL-BEING

Self-determination

(the ability of people (and groups of people) to make choices and develop their capabilities)

Each of us will admit wanting a certain degree of autonomy. We want to make choices about what aspirations that we (or our families, or our communities) will pursue, and about the kinds of capabilities that we want to develop. We want to be able to make choices about our own conceptions of the good life. But we are not free to choose anything and everything. Our choices are constrained by the moral, legal, political, economic, and social conditions of the various communities that we are a part of.

Equality

(the understanding that conditions and resources for well-being have to be distributed fairly)

At any time, there are limited resources present to foster peoples' choices, and facilitate interdependence. How should these resources be distributed? This conception of well-being acknowledges that conditions and resources for well-being have to be distributed in ways that meet principles of fairness — in ways that account for people's differing aspirations and needs.

Democratization

(the recognition of inclusion and participation in public and private decision-making)

People want to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. People flourish when they feel they have a voice, and when they have opportunities to have their concerns listened to — in both private and public life.

Mutual recognition and interdependence

(people feel valued, are seen as valued, and recognize value in others)

Communities are more than a collection of self-determining individuals.

Communities require relationships of mutual recognition and interdependence — where people feel and recognize themselves as valued, are seen as such by others, and recognize the value of other people.

People (and groups) make choices about who they are going to be in the world, and how they will get there, within a context of social relationships. The relationships between individuals, groups, and the larger society, and the decisions and agreements reached within the context of those relationships, underlie the social institutions that we develop to promote individual and collective well-being.

Security

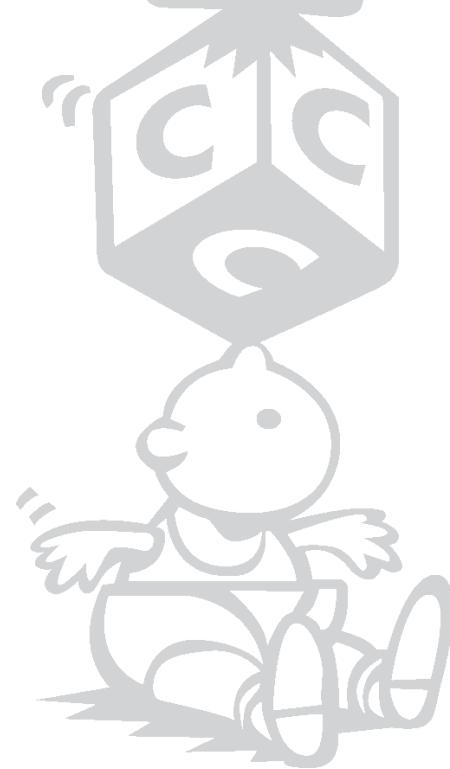
(ensuring that physical, emotional, and economic needs are met)

People will only be able to grow and flourish when they have a strong sense of security — when their physical, emotional, and economic needs are met. Basic to security are good health, economic stability, personal safety, and freedom from violence.

Citizenship

(recognition of rights and reciprocal obligations)

Citizenship is the recognition that people possess rights, and that people are likewise obligated to respect the rights of others. An understanding of citizenship is important for well-being as it conveys that people have the opportunity, and a responsibility, to participate in, and enjoy, all aspects of human life.



mental needs of children across various areas of government responsibility, including health, social services, justice and education. Its intent is to build on existing programs like the National Child Benefit (NCB), an income transfer program designed “to help prevent and reduce the depth of child poverty.”² Poverty is recognized as causing a greater risk of suffering and lost opportunity for low-income children. Two Health Canada programs, the Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), and the Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program (CPNP), are also intended to address the needs of children at risk, and are seen as foundational components of the National Children’s Agenda, which is intended to serve “as a far-reaching, long-term action plan for coordinating and advancing actions in a wide range of children’s issues.”³

To their credit, these program and policy initiatives recognize the need for sectoral integration of the determinants of health and well-being to help clarify how these various initiatives can complement each other and contribute to greater health for the whole population. They were developed with little involvement of the non-governmental social policy community however, and — with the exception of the NCB, CAPC, and CPNP — they tend to state goals without mechanisms for implementation, monitoring or accountability.

All of these program commitments, whatever their objectives, have been introduced at a time of reduced government expenditures on social programs, which has resulted in reduced availability, accessibility and adequacy of these services; a public view of the social safety net as increasingly ineffective; and an

elevation in poverty levels and inequality. Statistics Canada reported in 1996 that “the total incomes of the poorest 20 percent of Canadians had dropped dramatically because of a combination of lower earnings and cuts to cash transfers from governments.”⁴

Service providers at every level are clamouring for more program financing. In some respects, however, this has always been the case. While professionals and bureaucrats have long argued that social problems can best be addressed with additional money, the relationship between program spending and program outcomes is not always positive.

Policy goals, values, and a framework for well-being

Meeting commitments and ensuring child and family well-being is obviously more easily said than done. The appropriateness and effectiveness of policy options depends, to a great extent, on the underlying assumptions and values of politicians, policy-makers, and the public at large. Reviewing these assumptions and values can help guide our choices.

Well-being has been a topic of discussion and debate for thousands of years, stemming from a desire to comprehend and enhance our human condition. The good life, flourishing, welfare, quality of life, fulfillment, the ultimate end — all have been used to describe well-being. According to the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, well-being is “the state of being or doing well in life — a happy, healthy, prosperous condition.” Finding our own definition is vitally important — if we can’t define what

our ultimate ends are, how will we know whether we’re approaching them, or even whether we are going in the right direction?

In recent years a number of reports have examined Canadian values and proposed new “frameworks” and “paradigms” of well-being to understand social welfare. Traditionally, we have assumed that everyone is similar, and that well-being can be measured and ranked according to a universal list of individual needs — usually economic. These new approaches define well-being as a dynamic process in which people are linked together in ever-widening circles of interpersonal and institutional relatedness, grounded in genuine concern for the well-being of others, common understandings of fairness, and clearly understood expectations of one another. These links are nurtured by mutual respect — the attitude that people are valued simply because they are human and share similar circumstances. Such ties humanize what would otherwise be a society of self-seeking individuals engaged in mutual exploitation.

The still-dominant conception of welfare is as a needs-based, residual approach that attempts to guarantee basic supports to ‘those in dire need’. The shift to an active approach to well-

New approaches define well-being as a dynamic process in which people are linked together in ever-widening circles of interpersonal and institutional relatedness.

being is based, instead, on a commitment to a set of principles and values for all Canadians, regardless of their social, economic, or physical situation, and a vision of the 'healthy society' that embodies these principles. The table on page 33 briefly proposes a framework for well-being based on an interdependent set of six values or principles. The proposal was developed to present well-being as an organizing idea in assessing and influencing the policies and strategic decisions of governments and other organizations.⁵

Conclusion

We all play a role in promoting and ensuring well-being. But it is important to acknowledge the critical role of governments. The framework for well-being proposed above challenges the idea that the private pursuit of personal aspirations can be separated from the social, economic, political, and environmental context that makes the pursuit possible. Well-being rests on a foundation of societal commitments to self-determination, mutual recognition and interdependence, and the realization of equality. The role of governments is to ensure that systemic barriers to well-being are overcome.

"We need to press courageously to discuss well-being and define it, even if we suspect that this process will shake up our worldviews and challenge our power structures and our lives. If those power structures and lives are in fact creating well-being, then they won't be challenged. If they are not, then they should be shaken."⁶

1 Edward Broadbent. *The Rise and Fall of Economic and Social Rights - Thoughts on Citizenship in the Welfare State in the North Atlantic World*. Oxford (Oxford University, 1997).

2 Federal/Provincial/Territorial Ministers Responsible for Social Services. *The National Child Benefit: Building a Better Future for Canadian Children* (Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada, 1997), 6.

3 Government of Canada, *Background - National Children's Agenda* (Ottawa: Minister of Public Works and Government Services, 1997), 1.

4 National Council of Welfare *Poverty Profile* (Ottawa: NCW, 1988), 1, quoting *Income Distributions by Size in Canada, 1996* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1997, catalogue No. 13-207-XPB).


5 Marcia Rioux and David I. Hay (eds.), *A Conceptual Framework for Well-Being* (Vancouver: Social Planning and Research Council of BC, 1993).

6 Donella Meadows, *Indicators and Information Systems for Sustainable Development*, A Report to the Balaton Group, (Hartland Four Corners, VT: The Sustainability Institute), 66.

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EN BREF

Afin de pouvoir élaborer une approche commune à l'égard du bien-être des familles et des enfants canadiens, il faut d'abord comprendre les engagements internationaux et nationaux qui ont été pris, les tendances gouvernementales en matière de dépenses et d'investissements, ainsi que les choix politiques et les valeurs qui sous-tendent ces tendances. Cet article propose que l'on passe d'une approche du bien-être familial fondée sur les besoins à une approche plus dynamique de promotion d'une « société saine », et décrit un modèle de bien-être fondé sur six principes interdépendants.



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